

**Joseph E. Brent**

# **Preserving Kentucky's Civil War Sites: Grassroots Efforts and Statewide Leadership**

## **Background**

**I**n 1991, as the American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) was being organized in Washington, the Kentucky Heritage Council (KHC) began what would become its Civil War Sites Preservation Program. The Heritage Council never planned this program; rather, it simply grew out of our response to the ABPP and requests for assistance from local groups.

Kentucky's Civil War initiative got underway in the fall of 1991. Using recaptured historic preservation funds (HPF), a preservation and management plan was begun for the Battle of Perryville State Historic Site, the location of the largest Civil War battle fought within the state. A portion of the site had been owned by the state since about 1902, and in 1991 the park occupied some 98 acres. Unfortunately, documentation for a National Historic Landmark nomination indicated there were over 3,000 acres of critical battlefield lands. Almost all of these were in private hands and had little or no protection whatsoever.

With guidance from the ABPP, the KHC and consultant Mary C. Breeding began work on what would be the first "community consensus" planning project in our state. Susan Braselton (currently of The Civil War Trust, then the KHC staff person in charge of this project) put it this way:

"We really did not know exactly what we were doing in the beginning. We played it by ear. But we knew that in order for the project to be successful we had to have both the support and input of the battlefield landowners." KHC staff and the project consultant held several community meetings to solicit input and to try and reach a level of trust with the landowners.

Over the years there had been many efforts, at least on paper, to turn the Perryville Battlefield into a first-rate tourist destination. Because this had not happened, many of the people in the area were hesitant to believe that anything would really come of this planning effort. The community consensus planning approach made the difference as landowners slowly came to realize that their future was not being planned for them, but by them. At first it was like pulling teeth to get any information out of them, but by the third meeting they began to open up and tell us their vision for the

battlefield area and how the plan could best serve their needs in the future.

It also didn't hurt that in June 1992, Kentucky Governor Brereton Jones announced that \$2.5 million dollars in Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) funds had been awarded to the Perryville Battlefield. These funds were to be used for land acquisition, interpretation, and other improvements to make Perryville one of the premier Civil War sites in the nation. The preservation and management plan would serve as the blueprint for the ISTEA project.

The Perryville planning project was the catalyst for Kentucky's Civil War sites preservation effort. It introduced us to the national players and was the springboard that launched the program we have today. In the midst of the effort at Perryville three things happened that turned a planning project into an agency program: the congressionally mandated Civil War Sites Advisory Commission (CWSAC) survey, a preservation effort at the Mill Springs Battlefield, and the first national battlefield preservation conference, held in Lexington in June 1992.

All of a sudden all hell broke loose and we were knee deep in the Civil War. The CWSAC forced us to inventory eleven of the battlefields in our state. This survey effort was part of a larger project designed to quickly examine some 384 Civil War battle-

fields in 26 states. The idea was for someone (in the case of Kentucky, me) to go out and physically survey and assess the condition of each of the battlefields according to the criteria set up by the CWSAC and the National Park Service (NPS). The survey broadened both the scope of the sites at which we were looking and our constituency. From this effort we also came to understand that one could not really comprehend the Civil War in Kentucky simply by examining the battlefields.

We found that in Kentucky there were numerous extant Civil War sites that never saw combat, but their story was essential to understanding what happened here between 1861 and 1865. It fell to the KHC to provide guidance for these types of sites because both the ABPP and the CWSAC were only looking at battlefields.

All the same we began our effort with battlefields. In April of 1992 we felt that we must get a preservation effort underway at Mill Springs. To jumpstart this effort we mailed out a flyer to people in the Pulaski County-Somerset area who were on our mailing list asking them to come to a meeting at Somerset Community College to discuss the future of the Mill Springs Battlefield. Approximately 25 people attended this meeting. We outlined the efforts of the ABPP and the CWSAC and explained the funding opportunities available for battlefields at the time.



**The “Mother”** of the Mill Springs battlefield preservation effort, Dorothea Burton, seen here in a 1930s photo, began decorating the *Zollie Tree* in the early 1900s. Her efforts led to the erection of two monuments here and began the long process of preserving the site.



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That night, in fact, before we left the classroom, the Mill Springs Battlefield Association was formed. We worked with them to secure funding from the ABPP to begin their own community consensus preservation and management plan.



**Reenactors** fire and 21 gun salute and play taps for the dead at Zollicoffer Park at the Mill Springs Battlefield National Historic Landmark as a part of the annual memorial service on the Saturday closest to January 19.

Two months later, the first national battlefield preservation conference, "Civil War Battlefields: Forging Effective Partnerships," was held in Lexington. This conference was held in conjunction with a CWSAC meeting, and the two events brought national recognition to our efforts. One of the most important conference activities involved a bus tour organized for the CWSAC. The tour took the commission to the Perryville and the Mill Springs battlefields. At

the town of Nancy, where the Mill Springs Battlefield is located, the bus was met and escorted by local police to Zollicoffer Park. There several hundred people met and welcomed the CWSAC to Pulaski County. This was real down-home stuff: Boy Scouts were on hand, as well as local officials, and the Nancy Ladies Club served lemonade and homemade cookies. The commission was overwhelmed by the show of support for them and the effort to save the battlefield. Prior to the Kentucky meeting they had been confronted by land-rights advocates in Virginia and the positive reception was in stark contrast to those meetings.

The conference itself was also a resounding success: over two hundred people attended two days of meetings in Lexington that brought together speakers from all over the country to exchange ideas and look at methods for saving our nation's Civil War heritage. The conference and the ABPP emphasized the importance of forming partnerships to find creative ways of preserving land when the shrinking government made finding large sums of federal money difficult at best.

That same year saw the Middle Creek Battlefield, a CWSAC site in extreme eastern Kentucky, earn listing as a National Historic Landmark. Also, the Mill Springs Battlefield Association purchased their first 19 acres with funds from The Civil War Trust, the KHC, and moneys they raised locally. Wildcat Mountain

Battlefield, also a CWSAC site, erected two interpretive signs as part of a Kentucky Bicentennial project. The result of these efforts was that by the end of 1992 the KHC had a Civil War Sites Preservation Program in everything but name.

In 1993, the preservation effort mushroomed and my job as the "Civil War guy" was pretty much confirmed. This was a year of rapid development as the Kentucky Department of Travel, with input by the KHC, created their first heritage tourism piece. This publication included a 25-stop tour of Civil War sites across the state. The Heritage Council has enjoyed a close relationship with the Department of Travel ever since and we have worked together on numerous projects.

Also in 1993, the Heritage Council first made a strong commitment of grant funds to Civil War projects. Of slightly over \$100,000 in grant funds, some \$38,500 went to Civil War sites. These funds were spread over six projects at four sites, and only one, the Battle of Richmond, was a CWSAC site. The KHC has always had a strong HPF grant program and once we became serious about working with Civil War sites, we began to use our grant funds to help them. This was essential since the ABPP funds were limited to priority-one sites, and in Kentucky that meant Perryville and Mill Springs. Never underestimate what \$5,000 can do for a fledgling organization.

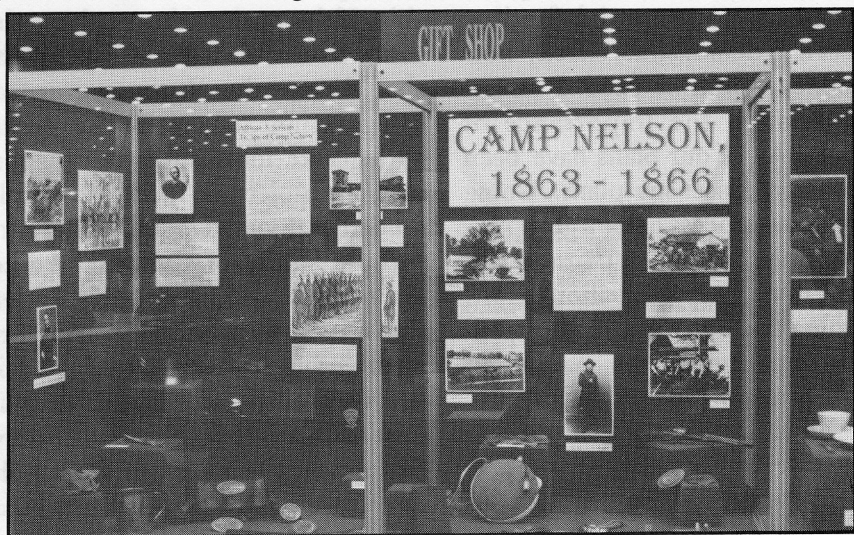
The key to our program has been the willingness on the part of the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), David L. Morgan, to make our funds and staff stretch as far as possible. This means that staff will, in special situations, do National Register nominations themselves rather than use grant funds to pay consultants. This occurred for Mill Springs, Fort Duffield, Middle Creek, Fort Sands, and the statewide multiple-property nomination for the Civil War monuments. We were proactive instead of reactive. Often I would go to areas that had sites and encourage them to apply for grant funds or offer them technical assistance. Of course, this often meant long hours and a lot of travel.

As you might imagine, this kind of commitment is not without its rewards. By 1994 our efforts had not only gained national recognition, but we were gathering steam in the Commonwealth. To help our partners, we had begun publishing a Civil War newsletter that included information on grants, research, and other forms of technical assistance. In addition we held a Civil War preservation conference in Harrodsburg that drew nearly 100 people from within the state and the region. Our goal was to develop partnerships with the local nonprofit organizations, and to help them partner with their local governments and other governmental agencies to enhance their efforts.

In 1994 we turned the corner with our program. Two sites, Camp Nelson and Fort Duffield, received ISTEA funding. Again, neither of these sites was a battlefield. The key to their success was that both had committed nonprofit groups who worked closely with their local governments. The Heritage Council also worked with the Kentucky Department of Parks to help it develop a preservation and management plan for Columbus-Belmont State Park. This was a straight partnership project. We brought in people from the NPS, Murray State University (MSU) and the University of Kentucky, Kentucky Department of Travel, and of course our staff. We held a community meeting at the park and then spent a day and a half hammering out the

details. As a result, we have developed a better working relationship with parks.

Another development from that project has been our relationship with Murray State University, which has become a strong partner in the preservation process. MSU has worked with us and other agencies to obtain funding to help several sites in the western Kentucky area. MSU archaeologists have worked over the past several years at Fort Smith in Livingston County. These efforts have involved the local high school and have created an atmosphere of pride within the community that simply did not exist before. The public history program at MSU has helped at Columbus-Belmont and Sacramento. Bill Mulligan's article



**The Camp Nelson** archaeological display at the 1997 Kentucky State Fair. This was part of a larger exhibit "Kentucky African Americans in the Civil War: The Defining Moment in the Quest for Freedom" sponsored by the Kentucky Heritage Council, Kentucky State University and the Kentucky African American Heritage Commission .

[in Part 2 of this series] will go into these efforts in great detail, so I will simply say that they have been an important part of our effort, one that has made a huge difference within our state.

All of these efforts paid dividends. Not only did our sites see the benefits of working with their local governments and universities, but we began to develop a process for the nonprofits to bring their sites "on line," if you will. First, if the site was not listed in the National Register, we urged them to have a nomination prepared, and as noted we often prepared it for them. We then encouraged them to develop a preservation and management plan. Such a plan gives each effort legitimacy; this cannot be stressed too much. Once a plan is developed a site can go to potential funding sources and demonstrate exactly how the money would be used. I cannot stress enough the importance of planning. All of our plans have been community consensus plans. Going through this process helps a group focus and often brings new partners and players into the preservation effort. Just going through the planning process is important to the maturation process of a nonprofit group.

### **Reality Check**

From the above narrative it would appear that we had no problems and everybody was in favor of everything that we tried. It might also seem we did it all by ourselves, with a little

help from the ABPP. Well, yes and no. The CWSAC survey revealed that the battlefields at Paducah, Ivy Mountain, and Barbourville were lost. The problems related to urban sprawl, even in towns as small as Barbourville, can easily destroy a fragile resource. The battlefield at Paducah actually was mostly gone by the late 19th century. Ivy Mountain, or Ivy Narrows, was lost when the narrows were bulldozed away for the improvement of U.S. Highway 23 between Prestonsburg and Pikeville in eastern Kentucky. Local historians were aware of the battlefield at the time of the road construction in the 1920s, and a memorial arch was promised, but never built.

One truism is that nothing can be accomplished without local leadership. If the reader takes nothing else away from this article, he or she should remember that a state or federal governmental agency cannot buy or legislate local support. Without that, any project, no matter how well-funded, is doomed to fail. Fort Sands and the Battles of Cynthiana reflect the problems when no local leadership exists. Fort Sands is a pristine earthen fort complex constructed in late 1862 to protect a vital railroad trestle. Located in Hardin County, Kentucky, just north of Elizabethtown, a mid-sized Kentucky community, Fort Sands' location astride Interstate Highway 65 makes it a prime location for tourists. The fort is in private hands, but the landowners

have expressed a desire to have the site open to the public. Several well-attended public meetings demonstrated support for a project to identify and mark the Civil War sites in the Elizabethtown area. However, no person was identified to lead the effort. Consequently, nothing has happened. The landowners are frustrated at the inactivity.

The situation at Cynthiana is similar. Confederate General John Hunt Morgan attacked this Bluegrass town twice, once in 1862 and again in 1864. Portions of two of the battlefields remain intact. In fact, the battlefield was given a priority-two rating by the CWSAC. To date, this office has been unable to find anyone in Cynthiana or Harrison County who is willing to lead a preservation effort. Again, there has been little activity in the area.

### **Friends, Partners, and Self-help**

As a historian one of my on-going pet peeves is that all too often, especially in the interpretation of Civil War sites, the event or place is not put into context. Therefore, it is important that our Civil War sites preservation effort needs be placed into context as well. Even though we would like to, we can't take all of the credit for doing everything all by ourselves: coming up with all the ideas and arranging all of the conferences and publicity. We didn't, but we took advantage of every opportunity that came our way.

Perhaps one the most useful efforts we have participated in has been The Civil War Trust's Civil War Discovery Trail. To date, this is only national effort to promote and market Civil War sites as heritage tourism destinations. We were one of the early partners with the trust on this venture. The KHC and the Kentucky Department of Travel have worked together to make this program successful in our state. The Civil War Trust designed the trail to ensure its success. No site could be on it unless properly interpreted. The reason for this is simple: there is nothing worse than sending tourists 50 miles out of their way and, when they get there, all they get for their efforts is a pasture and a highway marker. This leads to frustration and bad word of mouth.

We now have over 50 sites on the Discovery Trail. These include everything from battlefields to house museums to cemeteries. Once the initiative began, people wanted to know: "How can we get on that trail?" A site's inclusion on the trail has helped gain wider support for some sites. When the local tourism office begins to get calls from all over the country wanting to get information on their site, it makes them take notice.

The sale of Civil War commemorative coins also proved to be a plus for at least two of our sites. Both Perryville and Mill Springs received funds from the coin sales. However, we went a step further and utilized a

ceremony at Mill Springs to help kick off the drive to sell the coins. In January 1995, United States Treasurer Mary Ellen Withrow came to Nancy, Kentucky, to unveil the Civil War commemorative coins. This event drew several hundred local people on a very cold January day. It brought a great deal of positive publicity too for the efforts at Mill Springs, and again demonstrated what strong grassroots support can do.

But perhaps the most significant development to date has been our judicial use of ISTEA funding for our Civil war sites. Kentucky's SHPO, David L. Morgan, realized the potential impact this funding could have not only on Civil War sites, but on historic preservation in general. Morgan worked closely with the Kentucky Department of Transportation and helped them develop the committee that evaluated the ISTEA applications. The net result of Morgan's foresight is that over \$4 million of ISTEA enhancement funds have been made available to six Civil War sites. This windfall has brought about a profound change in the landscape of Civil War sites, and by the year 2000 Kentucky will have some of the best state, local, and private battlefield parks in the nation.

While ISTEA has accounted for the lion's share of the funding going to Civil War sites in Kentucky, these funds have only made their way to six sites. On the other hand, the KHC

has expended nearly \$200,000 at fifteen sites across the Commonwealth. This seed money has helped small organizations grow and get themselves into the position to seek funding of the magnitude offered by ISTEA. In addition to our funding, moneys from the Kentucky Humanities Council, the Kentucky Oral History Commission, a state parks bond issue, and a matching grant fund administered by the Kentucky Department of Travel have affected a total of twenty Civil War sites statewide. To date, \$6,362,037 has found its way to sites; over \$1.2 million of that was money raised locally.

Our success is due to a willingness to work hard for our constituency, help them find creative ways to fund projects, going into the field to help them. We do not expect people to come to Frankfort to meet with us. Most of these people are volunteers and they work during the day. So it is often up to us to go to them and meet with them when and where it is the most convenient for them. We have guided them through the grant process and have offered them technical advice or helped them find it from other sources. We have benefited from the SHPO's attitude toward preservation and use of the limited funds available to us. The long and short of it all is that hard work, creativity, and local support are the secrets to success. Without them none of this would have been possible.

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